

**INCLUSIVE EDUCATION SUPPORT SYSTEMS:  
TEACHER AND ADMINISTRATOR VIEWS**

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*Studies have shown teacher attitudes to be an important factor in the success of integrative practices in special education. In particular, many teachers feel that their efforts at integration are not supported by their administrators. In this research paper, interviews with both principals and teachers have confirmed this assumption. While principals felt that there were several systems in place through which they were being supportive, teachers believed this was not the case. More specifically, this paper examined the kind of support principals believed they were offering with the kind of support teachers wanted to be receiving.*

Education of students with disabilities has been and continues to be a focus of educational reform. At the heart of the issue is the movement of students with special needs from a segregated/congregated setting wherein students with special needs are grouped together, to a more inclusive setting where they are integrated with typically developing peers. This movement is referred to as mainstreaming, integration, and the regular education initiative. Integration/mainstreaming can be defined as the placement of learners with disabilities in regular classes on a full-time or part-time basis with typically developing peers. In this model special education support services can be delivered inside of the regular classroom, but more typically involve sending the student out of the regular class during some part of the school day to receive special instruction (Bunch, Finnegan, Humphries, Doré, & Doré, 2005). While integration differs from full inclusion where students with special needs are unquestionably placed in a regular classroom with typically developing peers for the whole day and have special instruction delivered in the regular class (Bunch, Finnegan, Humphries, Doré, & Doré, 2005), integration can be seen as a positive step in the acceptance of students with special needs into the regular classrooms of their neighborhood schools. For the purposes of this paper, the terms integration and inclusion will be considered synonymous.

Studies of educator attitudes towards integration have indicated that the attitudes of principals and teachers differed with regard to the ease and success of mainstreaming (Garver-Pinhas & Schmelkin, 1989; Junkala & Mooney, 1986; Walsh & Kompf, 1990). Bunch (1992) specifically pointed to a belief among teachers that their administrators did not support their efforts at integration as strongly as principals believed they did. Whereas principals were positive regarding their level of support, teachers were significantly less positive that they were receiving the kind of supports they needed. A considerable number of studies have documented the un-preparedness for inclusion of members of both groups. Fox and Ysseldyke (1997) pointed out that many administrators failed to implement inclusive programming due to inadequate training and lack of administrative leadership. Cook, Semmel, and Gerber (1999), in a study of principal and special education teachers found differences of belief between these two groups regarding challenges presented by inclusion/integration. Damm, Beirne-Smith and Latham (2001) found disagreement between administrators and teachers regarding management of inclusive programs. They suggested that administrators may not have a good understanding of principles of inclusion/integration in the classroom. Limited administrator preparation for overseeing special education, and inadequacy of teacher pre-service preparation were also mentioned. Scruggs and Mastropieri (1996), in a synthesis of teacher perceptions of inclusion, spoke of teachers believing they had insufficient time, skills, training, and resources for inclusion. Olson and Chalmers (1997) pointed out that, while general educators were responsible for attending large numbers of meetings, making accommodations, and finding time for everything, administrators often failed to recognize their efforts. Werts, Wolery, Snyder, Caldwell, and Salisbury (1996) emphasized teachers' perceptions of need for resources for inclusion, especially as level of student challenge increased. This perception was accompanied by perception of lack of provision of needed resources by administrators. That such perceptions were not unique to North American education can be found in research such as that by Moberg (2000) of Finland and Sadek and Sadek (2000) of Egypt. Both pointed

to concerns regarding success of inclusion and administrators' understanding and provision of needed resources.

This study examined differences in perceptions of administrators and teachers by looking at how both groups understood the role of the school administrator in supporting regular classroom teachers in including/integrating students with challenging needs. Specific research questions were: a) what type of support did principals feel they offered regular classroom teachers so that inclusion can take place?, b) what kind of support did regular classroom teachers want to see their principals offering?, and c) how did these views compare?.

### **Method**

The participants in this study consisted of six regular class, elementary school teachers and five elementary school principals from a Canadian metropolitan school system. All were recommended to the researcher as possible participants by an administrator with the School Board. Contact was made by the researcher and permission to be interviewed was obtained verbally from each of the participants. Each was told that they would be asked questions concerning their views on integration/inclusion. Terminology was not defined by the participants unless requested. None requested clarification of terms.

The teachers, identified in this study as T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, and T6, had been teaching from three to ten years with the average being 7.8 years. All had experience with the integration of students with special needs in their class. Five of the teachers had experience with mildly disabled students who were partially integrated into their classes; one teacher also had experience with a student with severe disabilities integrated into the class for the entire school day. The principals, identified in this study as P1, P2, P3, P4, and P5, had administrative experience ranging from four to twenty-four years with the average being nine years. The system from which participants were drawn supported a special education model in which students with challenging needs were primarily served in congregated classes rather than the regular classroom. However, many of these students were also placed in regular classrooms for some subjects and spent from 30 to 70% of their time in a regular classroom alongside typically developing peers.

The research methodology used in this study involved formal interviews with participants using pre-set guide questions. Interviews took from 20 to 30 minutes each. Data analysis employed qualitative methodology, specifically the constant comparative approach in which transcriptions were read and re-read, points of interest coded and collated, and categories of interest generated (Glaser, 1992). All interviews were taped and each tape was transcribed within one week of the interview. Each transcript was proofread against the tape recording to ensure accuracy. Quotations are given verbatim without correction of typical grammatical lapses occurring during running speech.

### *Limitations*

There are several limitations to this study which need to be made explicit. First and foremost is the very nature of the data collection process itself. Interview studies have disadvantages which are inherent to the method not the least of which involves interviewer bias in interpreting the respondent's answers. In addition, because interviews provide less anonymity than other methods, they may influence the kind of answers provided by the interviewee (Bailey, 1987). Bias and subjectivity are, however, also possible when interpreting data in the process of coding. In addition, there was no follow-up to the interviews for purposes of clarification of participant answers. Finally, the size of the sample in this study limits the ability to generalize results. The current study is therefore, presented as a pilot study from which to gauge teacher and administrator ideas regarding supports they view as necessary for successful inclusion/integration.

### **Findings**

#### *Teacher Perceptions*

Teacher perceptions fell into seven categories. In the first, teachers defined their role in the integration model used in their schools. In the second, teachers described problems they experienced with integration. Following this, teachers were asked for their definitions of successful integration and, next, who they felt had ownership responsibility for students with special needs. Categories five and six dealt with issues of administrator support, while the final section explored teachers' overall beliefs about non-inclusive settings.

*Role in Integration*

Teachers appeared to have difficulty articulating their roles. There were marked tendencies to respond by referring to challenges of students or otherwise mentioning student needs rather than articulating what they believed their role to be. The following are examples of responses to questions of teacher role:

T1: *You have a wide variety of students. You have your so-called regular class and then who would be integrated in, would be your English as a second language, your special students, your learning disabled and gifted.*

T3: *I guess, first of all, the philosophy at this school is that even if kids do need some special education assistance, they're still integrated in the regular classroom. We have two special ed classes as well. They're called language classes or LD classes. So they're kids that have some sort of language disability.*

However, two of the six teachers offered quite different responses. One saw her role as coordinator of the curriculum in collaboration with special education teachers.

T2: *Well, I sort of coordinate the curriculum with the special education teachers, because we are not here for them to do their own thing and I do mine. So they follow their curriculum, except they do it in a different way.*

The other teacher suggested that she had no role in integration. As her response continued, it became apparent that she did have a role related to setting the curriculum, though collaboration with the special education teacher appears to have withered.

T4: *I would say that I hardly have one anymore. He [the special education teacher] used to stop in with me, and we'd have little meetings once in a while. At the beginning, he hoped that he was following the same program, maybe at a different rate, or he'd pick what was the important topic or focus. But now, its totally separate.*

Most teachers were unable to give a clear account of their roles in integration. They focused on labels and general type of student need. Two of the six defined their roles in terms of setting the curriculum for all children. Both indicated that their roles included collaboration with the special education teacher, though that collaboration failed at times. The findings appear to indicate that, overall, teachers were unable to give a clear account of their role in the process of integration.

*Challenges with Integration*

All six teachers had encountered challenge in their teaching due to the presence of students with special needs; finding *time* while simultaneously dealing with students with special needs was demanding. The issue of time, in fact, dominated the discussion and teachers expressed the concern that they simply did not have enough time to adequately address the needs of students with exceptionalities.

T3: *It is challenging because when you've got, you know, 27, which is what I've got most of the day. It's a big class for grade 3 as it is, and then to have four kids that need a modified program for math and language. It's busy. I just don't have the whole day to sit with them, because I've got 23 other kids that also deserve some attention.*

A second concern was making students too dependent on the personal assistance of the teacher through modifications, particularly at grade 7 or 8 levels. Finishing *in time* took on a particular meaning at these levels.

T4: *They're not anywhere close to meeting the academic levels that they need for high school. That's what scares me, 'cause in grade 7, we spend a lot of time preparing for high school.*

Both teachers appeared to see a time-bomb effect of students not being able to meet the demands of the regular curriculum. They saw themselves as caught in a curriculum-driven system and faced with students who did not have the personal or academic resources to keep pace with their more able peers academically.

Other teachers pointed to student inability to function independently, whether the reference was to personal independence or ability to deal with aspects such as written instructions.

T1: *I didn't know exactly what to do for Intermediate students to integrate them. In Intermediate, this is the question I have asked. I wanted to know exactly how far to go in the Intermediate, because you have to prepare them to be more independent in high school. Take*

*an example. In social studies we are doing mapping. With the special education students, they just cannot follow the written instructions. I have to spend extra time on every unit I'm doing.*

Lastly, student behavior was viewed as frequently distracting other students and taking time away from them.

T6: *The behavior adjustment child created a lot of difficulties in the dynamics of the classroom, especially in that he had a very low threshold for tolerating the other children and often he would explode unannounced. And that would result, not only in a break in my program, but it would result in me spending a good hour after his explosion in trying to calm the class down.*

Teachers found time for instruction of all students to be a complicating factor. They wrapped class size, need for modification of curriculum, student independence, moving to high school, lack of reading and writing skills, and student behaviour around the time issue.

#### *Definition Of Successful Integration*

Teachers, when asked for their definition of successful integration, focused on what success would look like. Focus was on modification of curricula to meet needs and having sufficient time.

T1: *Ideally, if the numbers were smaller, much smaller, and if it could be modified to the extent that you could spend more time with them; to make them understand. Well, it has to be their level.*

A second quality of success was that help was needed to achieve successful integration.

T3: *I guess if the special ed teacher helped me more as far as outlining their program for them, for their kids, so that they had really specific goals that they could work through. But I guess it would be easier if the teacher came on a really regular basis.*

In most cases, successful integration appeared to be defined by immediate concerns rather than any general idealistic view of what integration look like. Teachers who were having difficulty with modifications and class management defined successful integration in those terms. Others, whose frustrations stemmed from poor interpersonal relationships with the resource person, defined successful integration by focusing on this relationship. None of the teachers described hypothetical situations for successful integration which took into account concerns not immediate to them.

#### *Teacher Responsibility*

Classroom teachers tended to avoid responding to a direct question of who should have responsibility for students with special needs in regular classrooms. Initial responses were tangential and off-topic. When the question was repeated in different form, teachers did respond more directly. Responses had two qualities. One was that the regular classroom teacher held responsibility, though it might be shared with a special education teacher. The other was that the special education teacher held full responsibility. This was the position of the majority of participants.

T4: *Me. That's why I don't like sending them [to the special education teacher]. I feel like they're out of my hands. I want to take responsibility for them. It's to do with building trust and confidence.*

T6: *Special education teacher. Because I think with the smaller numbers, the special ed teacher is able to provide more consistent work with these students. And, probably, because of the greater contact, they know more of the things that need to be looked at.*

The primary finding under this category is that most teachers preferred another teacher to have responsibility for students with special needs in the regular classroom. However, if they were in the regular class, a special education teacher should be there to take responsibility. The basis of this belief was that the special education teacher had knowledge which the regular teacher did not, that the special education teacher had more contact with students with special needs, and that they were hired to do the job. Only a minority of regular teachers felt the responsibility to be theirs, hopefully with in-class assistance.

#### *Support Desired of Principals*

The question on supports desired of principals left no doubt but that teachers wanted their administrators to understand that special education teachers were a primary support for regular classroom staff.

T3: *I would like her to somehow be more in charge of what the special ed teachers are doing .... I think that they should be made to stick to whatever their schedule is.*

T5: *I would like her to keep better track of what the [special education] teacher is doing ...It would be nice if she could schedule meetings with him every so often, or even with myself and the [special education] teacher.*

Additionally suggested is that principals were not on top of the special education program and what the special education teacher was doing. As one regular classroom teacher said,

T4: *I would like him to know what's going on .... I'd like to see suggestions from him on how to improve the process.*

Other comments echoed this teacher's perception. In the following quote teachers indicated that they definitely expected principals to do more than what was being done in leading the integration program.

T6: *I think a more clear structure of what we're supposed to do and what kind of success we're supposed to achieve with the special students. And I also think that it's up to the principal again to establish a framework with a, how special ed will be handled in the school.*

A main element of desired support was stimulation of a close relationship between the regular classroom teacher and the special education teacher. It was obvious that regular classroom teachers felt that a close relationship was not common, and that teachers felt themselves powerless to do anything about it.

T6: *I think right now it's just left to everyone's devices and if you don't get along with the special education teacher, you never see each other.*

*I think it's the principal's role to mandate that close communication that such close teaching occur. I think, left to themselves, everybody does their own thing.*

Other points also emerged in response to what was desired of a principal. One of the six regular classroom teachers wanted the principal *To find another teacher for these students* ( T2) in what appeared to be complete rejection of any involvement with the integration program. Another stated that principals should take care not to place too many students with special needs in one class. However, what came through most powerfully was that regular class teachers desired their principals to ensure that special education teacher support was available, that close regular teacher -special education teacher relationships were expected and stimulated, and that principals assumed leadership of the program. What also came through was that most regular class teachers in this study did not believe their principals to be providing leadership or supports.

#### *Support Received From Principals*

The natural follow-up to regular class teacher desired supports was exploration of whether principals offered support and what forms this took. Regular class teachers encountered considerable difficulty responding to questions around principal support. Responses tended to be brief and negative. Answers such as the following were common:

T1: *I haven't really had support.*

T4: *None. None at all. He keeps totally out of everything and that's the reason I'm transferring [out of the school].*

T5: *Uh, well, no...the only support I would say I get is, is, you know, if you want to call it emotional support. With [the behavioral student] when we were having all those problems, she did keep me updated each week as to what[the behavior student's] status was.*

T6: *No.*

The answers above indicate that teachers do not feel their efforts at integration are supported by the principal.

#### *Beliefs About Integrative Settings*

Previous discussions reviewed regular teacher views of supports provided by principals. However, in interviews there was a quality which suggested that overall attitudes of regular teachers with regard to placing students with special needs in regular classrooms were negative. Regular teachers participating in this study questioned the correctness and value of students with special needs in regular settings. Definite support for placement in special settings was voiced. Consider, for example, the following general responses:

T2: *These children need help every day. They need the help every day, but now they are only going out [to a special class] three times, three afternoons. And the break in between [time in the regular class] is hampering their progress.*

T3: *Most of all, we need to look at what is best for the students, and for many the fact that regular classes are so large, leads to the inevitable [special class] placement because they can't cope in the regular class.*

In the example above, the size of the class was believed to keep students with exceptionalities from benefiting.

The findings for regular class teachers offer a bleak picture. There was a focus on student needs as being beyond regular teacher capacity, belief that students with needs had to deal with the curriculum of the regular classroom as did other students, but were unable to do so, and a belief that teachers simply did not have time to support these students academically and behaviorally. Regular teachers were unable to define what success in integration was, other than implying that it meant learning and behaving at the level of regular students. Their focus was on the challenges posed by students with special needs, and on need to have extra, but unavailable, assistance in the classroom. Teachers generally believed students with special needs not to be their responsibility, but that of the special education teacher. They saw support from principals taking the form of making special education teachers keep to a set schedule of support, and the principal assuming leadership of the integration program, and expecting and stimulating close regular teacher-special education teacher relationships. Teachers did not believe their principals delivered these supports. Finally, their experiences with integration convinced the majority of regular teachers that placement in special classes would meet the needs of students with disabilities more powerfully than would placement in regular classrooms.

In essence, built up over the past pages is a sense that teachers depend on their principals to assist them in developing successful integration programs. They want their principals to be active in leading the program, in providing needed supports, in ensuring a positive and supportive relationship with their special education colleagues, in recognizing the challenges a regular teacher faces, most particularly that of time, and in making certain that curricular expectations are clear and appropriate.

#### *Principal Perceptions*

Responses by principals to guide questions were not as varied or as full as those of regular class teachers. Major areas of discussion were perceptions of their own roles in integration and in support of regular teachers, in challenges presented to them by integration, and supports they would like to offer regular teachers.

Elementary principals in this study regarded their roles as being administrative in nature and avoiding interference with the daily running of the integration program. They acted as overseers.

P1: *My role is to make sure that, well, a lot of its administrative - get all the paperwork done. I read all the review forms. I read all the Pupil Education Plans.*

P4: *More or less to oversee [the program.] I have a lot of faith in my staff. I let them do whatever they want in terms of their program. I'm in their classes. I know what's going on.*

Responses such as these suggested that principals maintained administrative distance and a laissez-faire stance, but felt informed and in charge of the program. They also saw a major aspect of their role as principals to be arranging for and attending meetings.

Meetings seem to be numerous and viewed as a strategy for keeping tabs on the integration program. The following comment, again, illustrates this perception:

P2: *We've got a school based support team model here, and we meet on a regular basis in order to discuss kids that are at risk there, and to talk about their needs. Beyond that, I meet with the classroom teachers monthly to go over registers and talk about students that are having problems.*

Principals also viewed their role as one of being available to their teachers, encouraging and, again, non-interfering as indicated by the following comments:

P3: *I can encourage whatever should be happening to happen, but I don't have to encourage because the teachers here ...work in such close collaboration with the special ed teacher.*

P4: *I like to keep hands-off. They should be able to come to me. They usually don't though.*

Principals believed that the administrative strategies described are sufficient to keep them well-informed about the integration program. Various confident responses made this point. But responses from teachers did not support principals' views that they had a clear understanding of how things should be.

Overall, principals were confident that their overseer position, their closeness to the integration program, and their availability to teachers provided them a good understanding of dynamics around the program. They saw themselves as understanding what integration means, as possessing a sound idea of the challenges they faced as administrators, and as aware of the tension inherent in the student ownership question. They believed their integration programs to be acceptably successful. The principal perspective seemed to be that success in educating students with special needs in regular classrooms required regular teachers and special teachers work well together, and share responsibility for students with special needs. For example:

*P4: The special education teacher and the regular class teacher are really in sync.... Their timetables are such that they can actually get together and integrate their programs. The regular teachers feel so comfortable in their role as a team that they don't mind another teacher in the class.*

Earlier responses from teachers did not support the confidence of the principals. Responses from principals indicated a belief that they possessed a clear understanding of what was required in a successful program. Teacher responses suggested that principals were blind to the fact that assuming everything was well was not the same as ensuring that everything was well.

However, principals were not totally unaware of dynamics which may be disruptive to programs. They were aware of possible trouble spots. Responses, however, did not indicate how they saw themselves responding to these trouble spots. For instance, they understood that regular and special education teachers might not always work well together.

*P4: In any sort of collegial relationship, there still has to be somebody who co-ordinates it. The special education teacher – it doesn't matter whether it's behavioral or anything else – they set up the PEPs [Pupil Education Plans], they set up the education plans in consultation with the regular class teacher. They develop the PEP – they have to communicate that to the regular class teacher. That's usually where it breaks down.*

Additionally, principals understood that confusion might exist over who held responsibility for students with special needs and who took ownership? The following comment illustrates this perception:

*P2: Ownership is always a problem and it's been a problem since day one, as soon as we had differentiated classes. And, I think, that it's very much more demanding to meet the needs of a special education student in your room when you may believe in your heart that the special education person should be handling it.*

Recognition of possible challenges, however, was not supported by discussion of how principals might respond to challenges. When queried on what types of support principals would like to offer to promote program success, principals in this study seemed stymied. Three of the five repeated descriptions of how they believed integration programs to be running, or described problems experienced in other administrative assignments. Two principals did respond on topic, but not in terms of the range of challenges teachers noted. For example the following principals stated:

*P2: Resources are really a problem here and I would like to put more human resources in. A teacher assistant would be great.*

*P5: Well, I was going to say that I'd like to see social workers and psychologists assigned to the schools. I think that would help a lot, especially if I could pick them.*

Principals appeared not to have considered what resources would be of value to their integration programs. Principals seemed unaware of the variety of types of support teachers said they needed. When principals mentioned additional resources, they tended to focus on more personnel. In this one area, principals and their teachers were in accord.

### **Summary**

It was clear from participants' responses that there existed differing perceptions between principals and teachers regarding supports available for successful integration. Teachers did not feel supported by their principals, yet principals seemed to feel that they were offering support by taking care of the

administrative aspects of integration (i.e. scheduling meetings, overseeing paperwork). Integration was also seen to be complicated by what many teachers believed to be a curriculum-driven system and they appeared frustrated by issues of time and of curriculum demands. This finding has been supported by other studies such as that of Fox and Ysseldyke (1997) which also noted lack of time as a concern among teachers. Not only did teachers in this study feel that they lacked the time to adequately meet the needs of students with exceptionalities, but many felt that to give those students the extra time would mean a decrease in supports for regular class students. This was a similar finding in a study by Scruggs and Mastropieri (1996) which found that a considerable number of teachers in their study believed students with special needs required too much attention. An added strain on the issue of time concerned the pressure many of the teachers felt to ensuring completion of a set curriculum within a given period of time and their view that students with special needs hinder this process.

Cooperation between the regular class teacher and the special education teacher also appeared to be a significant concern. Many of the teachers felt that the pressures of integration could be alleviated somewhat through cooperation with the special education resource teacher. Thus they expected principals to ensure that the resource person cooperated as fully as possible with the regular class teacher. Teachers believed that principals had the power to enforce close cooperation. Principals, on the other hand, appeared to feel helpless in the face of a breakdown in communication between the two teachers. Interestingly, a study by Daane, Bernie-Smith, & Lathan (2000) noted the perception among administrators and teachers that collaboration between the regular classroom teacher and the special education teacher was not a comfortable relationship. Both principals and teachers in this study found teacher role definition and the sharing of responsibility for a child with special needs to be at the core of problems in integration. It is clear that research aimed at clarifying and making explicit the nature of this relationship is needed.

Researchers such as Moberg (2000) have highlighted the significant impact that teacher attitudes and commitment can have on the success of integrated programs. Researchers such as Dyal, Flynt, & Samuel (1996) have pointed to the critical role that principals play in supporting integrated environments. However the studies done so far have not shed a clear light on the relationship which needs to exist between the two parties in order for inclusion/integration to succeed. The discrepancies which have been suggested to exist in this study between principals and regular classroom teachers are a cause for concern and indicate a need for further research.

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